

Spatial Dimensions in the Novel, Mekong, and the Relationship between Thailand and Laos

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บทคัดย่อ

ในมิติของพื้นที่ “แม่น้ำโขง” นอกจากจะเป็นแม่น้ำที่มีความสำคัญทางด้านกาياภาพแล้วพบร่วมแม่น้ำโขงยังมีอิทธิพลและมีความสำคัญในฐานะแหล่งบันดาลใจในงานทางด้านสื่อสิ่งพิมพ์ ซึ่งมีนักเขียนวรรณกรรมจำนวนหนึ่งได้นำมาสร้างสรรค์และปรุงแต่งเป็นเรื่องราวต่างๆ ในโลกทางวรรณศิลป์ ไม่ว่าจะเป็นบทเพลง บทกวีพิพนธ์ เรื่องสั้น รวมทั้งนวนิยาย จากการสำรวจนวนิยายเบื้องต้นที่มีการใช้แม่น้ำโขงเป็นฉากนั้นมีจำนวนหลายเรื่องด้วยกัน อาทิ ลูกลำน้ำโขง ของคำพูน บุญทวี แม่โขง ฉบับของปองพล อดิเรกสาร ลูกแม่น้ำโขง เพื่อนรักริมโขง และมิตรภาพ-สองฝั่งโขง ของเขมชาติ เป็นต้น อนึ่ง นวนิยายเรื่อง “แม่โขง” ของปองพล อดิเรกสาร ซึ่งใช้นามปากกาว่า “พอล อดิเรกซ์” มีเนื้อหาที่แสดงให้เห็นความเกี่ยวข้องสัมพันธ์ระหว่างตัวละครกับพื้นที่แม่น้ำโขง ซึ่งเป็นพื้นที่หลักในการดำเนินเรื่องที่เชื่อมโยงเหตุการณ์ต่างๆ ตั้งแต่ต้นจนจบ ซึ่งให้เห็นนัยแฝงรันของตัวบทที่ผู้เขียนได้พยายามสร้างความหมายโดยใช้มิติของพื้นที่เป็นตัวตั้ง ดังนั้น บทความนี้ต้องการวิเคราะห์หนนิยามเรื่อง “แม่โขง” ในประเด็นความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างสถานที่กับตัวละครเพื่อชี้ให้เห็นความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างไทย-ลาวอันถูกเชื่อมโยงกันโดยแม่น้ำโขงในฐานะเป็นพื้นที่แห่งวิถีชีวิต จิตวิญญาณ อารยธรรม และความเชื่อ ซึ่งจากการศึกษาพบว่าหนนิยามเรื่องแม่โขงได้ใช้พื้นที่ฝั่งไทยเป็นพื้นที่แห่งชีวิต ในขณะที่พื้นที่ฝั่งลาวเป็นพื้นที่แห่งความตาย ซึ่งเสนอภาพผ่านตัวละครหลายตัวที่เดินทางมาบังฝั่งไปยังด้วยการข้ามแม่น้ำโขงเพื่อการดำเนินเรื่อง และเมื่อตัวละครเหล่านั้นต้องการกลับไปยังฝั่งลาว ตัวบทก็มักแสดงให้เห็นว่าตัวละครเหล่านั้นต้องประสบกับภัยต่างๆ จนกระทั่งสูญหายหรือเสียชีวิตไปในที่สุด

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Abstract

The Mekong, besides being a river of geo-physical importance, also has had significant influence as the inspiration for works of art, songs, poems, short stories, and novels. Several novels have used the Mekong River as a backdrop, including **Luk Lam Nam Kong** by Khampun Bunthawee, **Luk Mae Nam Kong**, **Puen Ruk Rim Kong** and **Mittraphap Song Fang Kong** by Khemmachat, and **Mekong** by Pongpol Adireksarn. The latter presents the relationships between the characters and the Mekong River area, the main site where the story takes place, and links together various events that take place there from the beginning to the end. This article analyzes this novel in terms of location, characters, and the Thai-Lao relationship that is linked by the river which was and still is a way of life, mind-soul, civilization, and belief. It examines how the novel portrays Thailand as a land of life, and Laos as a land of death as presented through several characters who crossed the river to Thailand in order to survive. When they had to return to Laos, they encountered diverse dangers, and some of them eventually ended up missing or dead.

Introduction

Mekong was originally written in English by Pongpol Adireksarn under the pen name, “Paul Adirex.” It was later translated into Thai by Wipada Kittikowit and published for the first time in 1997. Since then it has been published twelve times, indicating that it is of high interest to readers. The story is based partly on Lao history and it represents the politics, religion, economy, myths, beliefs, way of life, spirit, and social conditions of people who lived along both sides of the river. The author’s method is to create images that he examines and presents to the readers to understand. The novel contains both fictional and factual elements, especially from history, as Reunruethai Sajjapan notes:

Mekong is ... composed of several subplots, including the search for American soldiers who were missing during the Vietnam war, the treasure hunting of ancient Lao kings, the history of the civilization of the community at the basin of the Mekong River, the mysterious Puri tribe that had never appeared on any map, the construction of a bridge across the Mekong to connect Thailand and Laos economically and culturally, as well as the schemes of drug smuggling organizations. All of these plots are tied together by the Naga, a giant mythical snake in the Mekong River, who protected a treasure of the kingdom and brought mysterious and dreadful deaths to many people. **Mekong**, thus, is a novel that combines social truths with imagination.

From a basic study of the context, it was found that the novel uses the Mekong River area as its backdrop. The novel presents Thailand as a land of life, which is depicted through a variety of relationships between characters who crossed the border in order to survive, including Lao immigrants. Laos, by contrast, is depicted as a land of death through the relationships of the characters.

Consequently, spatial dimensions play a major role in the relationship between the brother-like countries of Thailand and Laos that have the Mekong as their border. The author chose to analyze the novel through spatial dimensions and characters in order to link the relationships between people and the river as well as the relationship between the two neighboring countries. In this article, the author aims to analyze spatial dimension in terms of the following ideas: 1) the Mekong area as one of sacredness and beliefs, 2) the characters and the lands of life and death in the novel, **Mekong**,

3) the Mekong area and the defeat of Thailand and Laos, and 4) the Mekong River and the relationship between Thailand and Laos.

The Mekong Area as One of Sacredness and Beliefs

The Mekong is an important and widely known river in Southeast Asia. It is one of the ten longest rivers in the world and it flows through many countries including Tibet, China, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, all the way to the South China Sea. It is also the 21st most important international river with the most plains in the world (Schaaf and Fifield, 1963, 17). In addition, the river has nourished the lives of millions of people in Southeast Asia for thousand of years because of its physical and biological abundance (Santasombat et al., 2009:2). Moreover, the Mekong River is home to over 1,700 species of fish, as well as *kai* or fresh water algae, prawns, shells, crabs, and many other aquatic animals that provide that provide food for millions of people (Santasombat et al., 2009:2)

The Mekong thus is a river of life that has nourished people along both sides for a very long time. It has been both an area in which to earn a living as well as a sacred space. To understand the concept of sacred space, we can consider the ideas of two famous scholars of religious studies. Joel P. Brereton (1995:526-531) views sacred space as a “defined place,” with a border or boundary that separates it from other spaces under normal circumstances through consideration of beliefs that emphasize the presentation of sacredness. Jonathan Z. Smith (1982: 189) uses the term “focusing lens” as a metaphor for sacred space in that it focuses attention on the forms, objects, and actions within this space. Thus, we can view the Mekong River as an area that carries the meaning of way of living, belief,

and spirit. The novel uses this concept to present images through the belief in the giant white catfish which Lao people consider sacred. If anyone caught this species of fish, they would have to let it go immediately because it is a spirit in the form of a fish that guards the river (Sombatying, 2009).

About two thousand years ago a Thai king came from the southern part of China and founded a kingdom called Yonok, its capital city was near the present site of Chiang Saen. The Yonok kingdom lasted several hundred years until one day its king caught a giant pure white eel from the Mekong and fed his people with its meat. That night the whole city of Yonok sank into the earth. That story has been told for generations, and now the people who live along the Mekong will not harm any pure white fish. (p. 18)

The novel also presents a belief that had been passed from generation to generation through the characters of two crewmen, as follows:

[a] monstrous catfish leaped high above the water as the remaining line tightened. To everyone's astonishment the color of the fish struggling on the line was pure white instead of the usual dark brown.

"The white catfish! It belongs to the River God!" one of the Laotian crew cried out.

"Let it go or the God will be angry and we'll suffer a calamity!" another crewman warned, as Dupree watched the white gigantic fish in fascination. (page 17)

In addition, the context also presents a conflict between old beliefs of the host and the ideas of Western visitors through the character of a Burmese sailor who heard of the myth from the Lao and one of the westerners, a character named Dupree.

After the Burmese scout finished, Dupree laughed softly and said, “A fish is a fish. I don’t believe in silly tales like that. I’m going to prove that these beliefs are nonsense...” (p. 18)

Another, equally strong belief that appears in **Mekong** is the belief in the Naga. This belief is deeply rooted in the Lao people on both sides of the river and it was influenced by Lanxang or Lao culture since the end of the 19th century in the era of King Fa Ngum (Chindawattanabumi, 1999: Introduction). Thus, the belief in the Naga remains as part of the moral precepts of the Lao and Thai people in the Mekong basin. The Naga became a part of the people’s way of life as seen in sculptures in temples, the statue of Lord Buddha seated on the Naga, ritual traditions such as the Naga ordination ceremony (Naga or *Nak* is the term used to refer to men being ordained because of the myth of a Naga who wanted to be ordained), and the Phra Uppakut procession ceremony. Concerning this belief, the novel’s author, Paul Adirux, mentions the myth in which the Naga was believed to be the creator and ancestor, and the representative of religion. At the same time Buddhism is a universal concept that can draw people with different nationalities and languages in the same culture (Evans, 2006: 13).

“You’ve already heard the mythical aspect from the monk Wasukree. A Laotian legend says that the Nagas existed even before the

Mekong and that they created the river. The legend has it that once there were two Nagas, named Srisattanak and Nahuttanak (Nak is Naga in Thai) living in what is now Yunnan province in southern China. One day they had a fight. Srisattanak was defeated, so he and his army of Nagas fled from Yunnan by digging their way through the earth, all the way to the South China Sea. The path that they made became the Mekong River.”

A few groups in the area believe that their ancestors originated from the Nagas. According to a Laotian legend, a young woman went swimming in a lake near her home in southern Yunnan, and touched what she believed to be a log floating in the water. Later she gave birth to a baby boy. A Naga king showed up claiming that the boy was their son. (p. 97)

Nagas were gigantic serpents in Buddhist mythology. Several legends about the Lord Buddha involved Nagas and they were regarded as devout upholders of the Lord Buddha’s teachings. Many believed that Nagas possessed the supernatural ability to change themselves into several forms, including human beings.

The myths presented through the above context and characters are evidence that the Mekong is not only an area with physical significance but also one of spirit embedded with beliefs that have been passed and told from generation to generation not just in Laos but also in Thailand. This area is also one of conflict between old and new beliefs having ethical differences.

Characters and the Lands of Life and Death in the Novel

Mekong portrays the death and disappearance in Laos of several characters who were soldiers of the Lao king. In the first chapter, King Fa Ngum decided to attack Luang Prabang and this brought great loss to his troops as many of his guards died in the Mekong River.

When Fa Ngum and most of his soldiers were in the middle of the river, they heard a thundrous noise coming from upstream. When they looked up, to their horror, they saw that the current had suddenly become very strong, and hurtling toward them in, in the river's swift currents, were logs of various sizes.

Terrified screams mixed with the thudding and crackling of breaking rafts as the avalanche of logs crashed into Fa Ngum's helpless soldiers.... (p.9)

Many years later during the Vietnam War, Captain Jim Mannix and John Deane, two American soldiers, also went missing after a brutal battle, and thus were listed by the Department of Defense as MIAs.

Captain Jim Mannix and Captain John Deane never arrived at Luang Prabang as they had intended. They and the ten POW's were among those listed by the US Department of Defense as MIA, Missing-in-Action. (p. 31)

In this way the novel presents the spatial dimension of death and context of characters who were Lao soldiers who lost the battle in their own

land, as well as the fate of soldiers from a third country - America - suggesting that the Mekong area itself was created to be a sacred space. Everyone who trespassed or showed disrespect to the land, whether they were local people or visitors from other countries, all ended up with the same fate.

Moreover, besides using Laos as the land of death, the author also uses Thailand as the land of life. Characters who were able to make it to Thailand survived, as seen in the relationship of King Fa Ngum and King Savangvatthana, as well as other Lao immigrants. **Mekong** presents the life of King Fa Ngum, who failed after attacking Luang Prabang as his troops lost the battle. He was able to get away by holding on to a piece of timber until he reached the coast and then walked to Muang Nan, which was a Thai (Siamese) territory back then.

“...King Fa Ngum who lost the battle of his own fate, decided to walk back to Muang Nan to pay off his karma.....” (Page 23)

Similarly, centuries later King Savangvatthana and Lao migrants also chose to live in Thailand after the transition of administration into communism in Laos as seen in the statement of King Savangvatthana as follows:

As you know, it's inevitable that the Communists will take over the country very soon. In a matter of weeks, Vientiane and Luang Prabang will fall. Thousands of people have crossed the Mekong into Thailand seeking refuge... (p. 32)

From examining historical data and analyzing characters who came from diverse classes in Lao society and chose to live in Thailand, which the

author referred to as the “land of life,” it was found that King Savangvatthana lived in the period of economic and political transition from democracy to communism which began at the end of 1975. The communist party, or Lao People’s Revolutionary Party, seized political power and defeated the right-wing government in Vientiane through political and military means throughout the 30-year period. They concealed themselves behind two organizations: the Pathet Lao movement and Lao Patriotic Front, with King Supanuvong as their leader. The Lao government later removed Lao kings from their posts (Sirikrai: 2005, Introduction, 3). The author of **Mekong** wanted his readers to see the ambiguity of historical circumstances that linked events between the characters in the land of death and the land of life.

The Mekong Area: and the Defeat of Thailand and Laos

In addition to presenting the Mekong River as a sacred space, a land of death and a land of life, **Mekong** creates the meaning of space and defeat, not just for Laos but for Thailand as well. As was clearly seen in history from the beginning of the 19th century, France was the first country that interfered with the land of the Lao, drafted maps, and demarcated the country’s present boundary lines. Consequently, until the first half of the 20th century, Laos was still an underdeveloped Indochinese colony of France in which economic, social, and political transitions would take place only later (Janthajorn, 2008: 286). Shortly after that, France was able to seize Luang Prabang and announce its seizure of power over the whole country of Laos. The greatest transition in administration took place in 1975 (Luangphasi, 2000: 73). The novel describes the situation after the revolution as follows:

“Even though Prince Supanuvong, the leader of the Pathet Lao, has royal blood in him, I have a feeling that our six-hundred-year-old Royal family has come to an end.” (p.32)

Furthermore, Thailand and Laos also lost a certain degree of control over their lands through characters from a third country in the construction of the Thai-Lao friendship bridge project as Jim McGee, John Davenport, and Dave Shawn were representatives of a powerful Western country. **Mekong** presents the intervention by using the concept of capitalism in the globalization period when the region was becoming prosperous as follows:

McGee could view the bridge that was being constructed to connect the two sides of the river and the two countries, Thailand and Laos.... The bridge was a gesture of goodwill from the US government, its funding had been personally initiated by the US President. It was intended to promote Laos' economic development, in an effort to create ties with the nineteen-year-old Communist regime. (p.36)

When combining the analysis of the novel and the information available, it is apparent that many powerful countries were very interested in the Mekong River area as they wanted to get benefits from its water resources. In the beginning of the colonial period, France and England sent teams to explore the river up to Xishuangbanna. At present, people throughout the world are still interested in that area because of its natural beauty as well as the mystery entwined with the beliefs and cultures of people along the river (Pattanaprasitporn, 2010: 91-92). From the above context, the defeat that the novel talks about reflects political and

administration systems that were transformed through the intervention of a third country. The statement of the king who had to surrender to his visitors reflects the hurt that has been accumulating until the present. At the same time, the capitalism that came with powerful countries made people fear that they might lose their country. Not only Laos, but Thailand its neighbor, which shared the same river, was also unable to withstand the forces of capitalism.

The Mekong: and the Relationship between Thailand and Laos

The Mekong as a river of history symbolizes the fact that the establishment of nations by the communities along both sides of the Mekong resulted from the migration of diverse ethnic groups throughout the historical period of civilization in various regimes. At the beginning of the colonial period, many modern states emerged that wanted to show their existence by clearly demarcating boundaries of the areas under their power on the world map. Consequently, the Mekong River became the boundary line between Thailand and Laos and the relationships of communities along the river became cross-border relationships (Thongkhanarak, 2008: 129-130). The novel depicts a good relationship between Thailand and Laos in the period when communism took over Laos in 1975, which was a time of difficulty for Laos:

After the Communist takeover of Laos in 1975, most of members of the Royal family, Rightist government officials, and businesspeople who had associated themselves with the so-called Capitalist government, fled the country with their families and settled in countries like Thailand, France, and the United States. (p. 51)

In addition, there was another relationship in terms of the people's way of life and belief where the belief system of Thai and Lao people along both sides of Mekong River came from early ideas that had been passed on from the past until the present (Pukkawes, 1999: 8). The author used the Naga as the main character throughout the novel. Most of the characters interacted with the Naga, including **King Wasukree** whose name means Naga, the **Puri tribe** which came from King Puritat, who was King Wasukree in past life, Dave Shawn, the engineer who constructed the bridge who was a Naga in a past life and was very interested in snakes, **Kim Baker**, the woman who was born in the year of the dragon and was the sister of Naga Supokha in her past life, and **Draco** whose name came from the word "dragon." The Mekong area context presents the relationship between the characters and those beliefs in terms of Buddhism. Buddhism influenced the social and cultural development of the Thai and Lao people, including customs and traditions amid transition during globalization.

The novel also presents the changing social trends ending with the current trend of globalization where the world can be linked by the mechanisms of politics, economics, and technology. As a result, the world is full of complexly entwined changes, and societies are becoming more diverse. The novel also presents the relationships between different ethnic groups through characters such as **Draco**, who is American, and **Kim Baker**, a Thai-American woman. Kim Baker is a symbol of the combination of the original (Thai) and globalization (American) in which globalization undeniably plays a significant role in driving the society towards development.

Conclusion

From the study and analysis of spatial dimensions in the novel and the relationship between Thailand and Laos, it was found that the Mekong area is involved with community relationships, beliefs, and ways of life and spirit of the people in the basin of the Mekong River. The novel used the area to present the following points:

First: the Mekong River as an area of sacredness and belief. The belief that the giant catfish was the fish of the gods that protected the river appears in the novel. At the same time, the belief that had been passed on among the people in the basin of the Mekong River was the belief in Naga. They believed that the Naga was the creator of the river and a representative of Buddhism. The symbol of the Naga became part of people's way of life as seen in sculptures, temple architecture, statues of the Lord Buddha and Naga, and ritual traditions.

Second: the relationship between spaces, which was implicitly explained as lands of death and life. **Mekong** portrays the death, loss, and disappearance of characters in Laos including the king's guards and Captain Jim Mannix and John Deane, the two American MIAs during Vietnam War. At the same time, Thailand is the land of life, as all the characters survived when they were in this land, including King Fa Ngum and King Savangvatthana, as well as the Lao immigrants.

Third: the relationship between the defeat of Thailand and Laos in which the novel mentioned how a third country interfered with politics and administration.

Finally: the relationship between Thailand and Laos.

After examining the above points and analyzing the data, the author

was able to see the relationship between literature (novel) → river (space) → humans' ways of life and spirit → and the relationships between countries. The novel also emphasizes and affirms the status of the Mekong as not only the boundary between Thailand and Laos, but also as a river with significant meaning in terms of sacredness, life, and spirit.

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